

God's Unexpected Medicine On Jonah 4:1-11

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church
Cincinnati, OH

The story thus far: God spoke to Jonah and sent him to preach to Nineveh, the great city of the Assyrian empire, the enemies of Israel. Jonah didn't want to take God's message to the enemies of his people, so he went on the run, catching a boat bound for Tarshish, which lay in the opposite direction. God sent a great storm, Jonah confessed to the sailors his wrongdoing, and he told them to toss him in the sea. They did so. God sent a great big fish to swallow Jonah and deliver him to dry land. After he was spit back up, Jonah made his way to Nineveh and delivered God's message. When they heard the message, the people of Nineveh were pierced in the heart and they declared prayer and fasting, longing for forgiveness. By all accounts Jonah's mission was an astounding success.

And we would love to stop the story right there. That would tie up all the loose ends and leave us happy. Unfortunately, Jonah doesn't end there; we get this troublesome fourth chapter. Jonah's not happy that his mission was a success; he's miserable. He's like a middle schooler who doesn't get his way. He sulks out to the edge of the playground and watches. You can almost imagine his arms crossed and his lower lip jutting out just a bit. And look at how he whines to God in Jonah 4:2-3. He's saying, "I knew it. I knew what you were going to do. I knew you wanted to show mercy." Jonah really didn't want God to show mercy, and now he's angry and upset and frustrated. Intellectually, we understand the reason: these were the enemies of Israel. And emotionally, there is something in the nature of his anger that is not all that foreign to us.

Several months ago, I was going on one of my tirades about Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft. I get this perverse glee anytime Bill takes a hit. He's just so big, has so much power, and so much of my paycheck goes to purchase his products or upgrade his products. And his goons dismantled the first company I worked for, enticing us with the prospect of big contracts, and then sweeping the rug from underneath us. So I was on one of my usual gripe fests, when a friend said "Russell, he's a smart and successful businessman who delivers a good product and employs a lot of people — why do you want him to fail just because he's rich?"

That hit me right between the eyes. And then I started to see it all around us. Look at the joy that people have in taking down the high and mighty. We saw

it when Martha Stewart's empire came falling down in her stock scandal, and when Rosie O'Donnell showed that she couldn't run a magazine. Look at the Michael Jackson scandal now. The news of celebrity downfall and failure attracts news coverage and viewers like moths to a flame. Indeed, an entire industry is built around it.

And to take it closer to home, haven't you secretly craved the comeuppance of people in your circles? Perhaps it's that terribly arrogant co-worker who seems to take all the credit for things that get done. Or that nosy neighbor who keeps meddling in everyone's business and spreading rumors up and down the street. Maybe it's that newcomer in your club or organization who's full of ideas and doesn't understand how things are done. I was sitting around with a group of my minister colleagues and they started griping about crossroads church — you know, the big megachurch down in Oakley. They have a rock band and an espresso bar and their building is an old warehouse. One of my colleagues calls it "Six flags over Jesus." I laughed — I thought the joke was funny. But I told my colleagues that I thought their griping was more jealousy than substance.

When we look under the surface of much of our anger and dissatisfaction in life, we find that it's usually pointed at "them." If it weren't for them, we could be successful. If it weren't for them, this would be a really nice town to live in. If it weren't for them, I could have genuine friendships. I know where my problems are and where they come from, and it's from them.

I suggest to you that such an outlook is destructive, and that to a lesser or greater degree, each of us has it. To one degree or another, we all tend to blame "them" for our problems, and secretly to desire their comeuppance or destruction. God has a medicine for this problem, but as usual, it is an unexpected medicine.

After Jonah's first whine session, God replied, "Have you any right to be angry?" (Jon. 4:4). And then when Jonah went off to sulk, God did something unusual. He caused a vine, a shrub to grow over Jonah to shade him from the heat. The text tells us that Jonah was very happy about this vine. Then God killed the vine and increased the wind and the heat. Jonah cried out again, "It would be better for me to die than to live" (Jon. 4:8). And it is at this point that God delivers his final sermon — but let's pause here for a moment. God uses the circumstances around Jonah to make a point. He gives Jonah temporary relief and then takes it away to make a point. He's grabbed Jonah's attention, and he's used some startling events to do it.

One of the great magicians/stuntmen of our time is David Blaine. He's the Harry Houdini of our age. He has pulled off some of the most memorable and bizarre stunts. Several years ago, he stood atop a 100 foot pillar for 35 hours. If he swayed too far to either side, he would plummet to his doom. He got the idea

for his stunt from reading about the ancient Christian desert mystics who spent years atop pillars to mortify their flesh. Another of his stunts was having himself encased in ice for three days. His latest stunt was to spend 44 days in a clear plexiglass box, which was suspended by cables 40 feet above the ground near Tower Bridge in London. Measuring seven feet long by three feet wide by seven feet tall, the box was just barely large enough to move around in comfortably. The only things he would have would be water, a quilt, a pillow, a photo of his mother, a change of clothes and his journal.¹

At the time I thought that this was just another stunt to feed Blaine's ego. But then I noticed something else: how the people who observed the stunt were acting. They would arrive early in the morning and blare loud music. Some would throw eggs or tomatoes at him. A tabloid newspaper grilled hamburgers under the box and used a toy helicopter to float a burger in front of his eyes. The London police had to tighten security because people tampered with his drinking water. I don't know if Blaine intended it, but he put on a living show about the cruelty in the human heart. He enabled ordinary people to show just how heartless they can be. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, it is quite an attention grabbing lesson. It is startling in its clarity. It's a message that ought to serve as an immediate corrective for all of us. That's the kind of medicine God dishes out. It's the kind that he dished out to Jonah.

And what was the point of the medicine? Jonah 4:10-11 enlightens us. God says, "Get a grip on reality. There are thousands of people in the city, and you care more about the plant than the city. Your priorities are way, way off." Jonah cared more about the plant than about the people. That's why the medicine is so painful sometimes: it exposes our own mixed up priorities. We care more about the program than about the people it serves. We care more about honor and prestige than about the people from whom we seek to earn it. We care more about our credentials than about the people we are called to serve with our knowledge. Jonah cared more about being right than about the souls of thousands of people in Nineveh. They could burn for all he cared, so long as he was right and he had his little plant to keep him cool.

Have you ever encountered those people whose soul has shriveled up around one or two things? They have this shell around their hearts, and their conversation seems to run in a well worn rut all around themselves and their little issue. C.S. Lewis, in his great book *The Great Divorce*, pictures hell as this grey ghostly town where people are given over to those little idols that consumed them in life. He pictures Napoleon in hell wandering up and down the empty halls of his house muttering to himself. "It was Nelson's fault. It was Wellington's fault. It was Josephine's fault. It was the church's fault."

God's unexpected medicine is simply this: the problem isn't with them, it's with us. The problem is within. As Pogo says, "We have met the enemy, and he

¹ *Time Magazine*, Nov. 3, 2003.

is us.” The medicine shows us that the problem we need to deal with most isn’t external, it is internal.

That’s where the story leaves us: Jonah starting to shrivel his soul, and God applying the medicine and challenging him. We don’t know if it worked or not. Why in the world would the book do that? Well, I have a theory. I believe that the book was primarily authored by Jonah himself, thus giving us a hint as to the results. He wouldn’t have written it this way if he hadn’t been changed by his final experience. He leaves it hanging like that to draw us into the experience. He shows that each of us could be that sulking prophet beneath a dead plant. He leaves the story unfinished to prompt us to ask ourselves if we are most concerned about our own little empires.

That’s the unexpected part of Jesus’ Ministry. Jesus constantly challenged all our personal idols. Look at how he challenged and criticized the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law, and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). These were good religious people, but they had taken something and made an idol out of it.

God says, “No. People are more important. Faithfulness to me is more important. You need to let go of your petty need to be in control.” You will never be in control enough to earn God’s love. You will never get all the right pieces in place to earn perfection. And if you’re not going to do it for yourself, you’re certainly not going to do it for the rest of the world. For those of you who are following the M’Cheyne reading plan with me, you just finished the prophet Micah a few weeks ago. The very last verses of chapter 7 are traditionally read along with the book of Jonah on the Day of Atonement when the Jews celebrate God’s forgiveness. They read this:

Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:18-19).

Christ is God’s plan for that mercy not only for Israel, but as we see in Jonah, for the nations as well.

Jesus came as God’s ultimate unexpected medicine. In his preaching he challenged our personal idols. God raised him up and then allowed him to die. But when he rose again, he caught our attention and has held it for 2,000 years. And it is through faith in that unexpected medicine that he heals our hearts, re-shifts our priorities, and enables us to live lives of love focused on others.

Mitch Albom's little book *Tuesdays with Morrie* stayed on the bestseller list for years. Albom was a sports writer who reconnected with his mentor Morrie Schwartz when Morrie was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. He visited Morrie every Tuesday, and the book is the result of their final conversations. In one of the early conversations, Morrie encouraged Albom to create his own culture around him. "The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it." And Morrie did just that:

Morrie, true to these words, had developed his own culture — long before he got sick. Discussion groups, walks with friends, dancing to his music in the Harvard square church. He started a project called Greenhouse where poor people could receive mental health services. He read books to find new ideas for his classes, visited with colleagues, kept up with old students, wrote letters to distant friends. He took more time eating and looking at nature and wasted no time in front of TV sitcoms or 'Movies of the Week.' He had created a cocoon of human activities — conversation, interaction, affection — and it filled his life like an overflowing soup bowl...

Morrie had told me: "So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."²

Jesus Christ is God's unexpected medicine. He came that we might live that kind of life, rather than a life of bitterness under a dead vine. Which is it going to be for you? You think about that. Amen.

² Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 42-43.